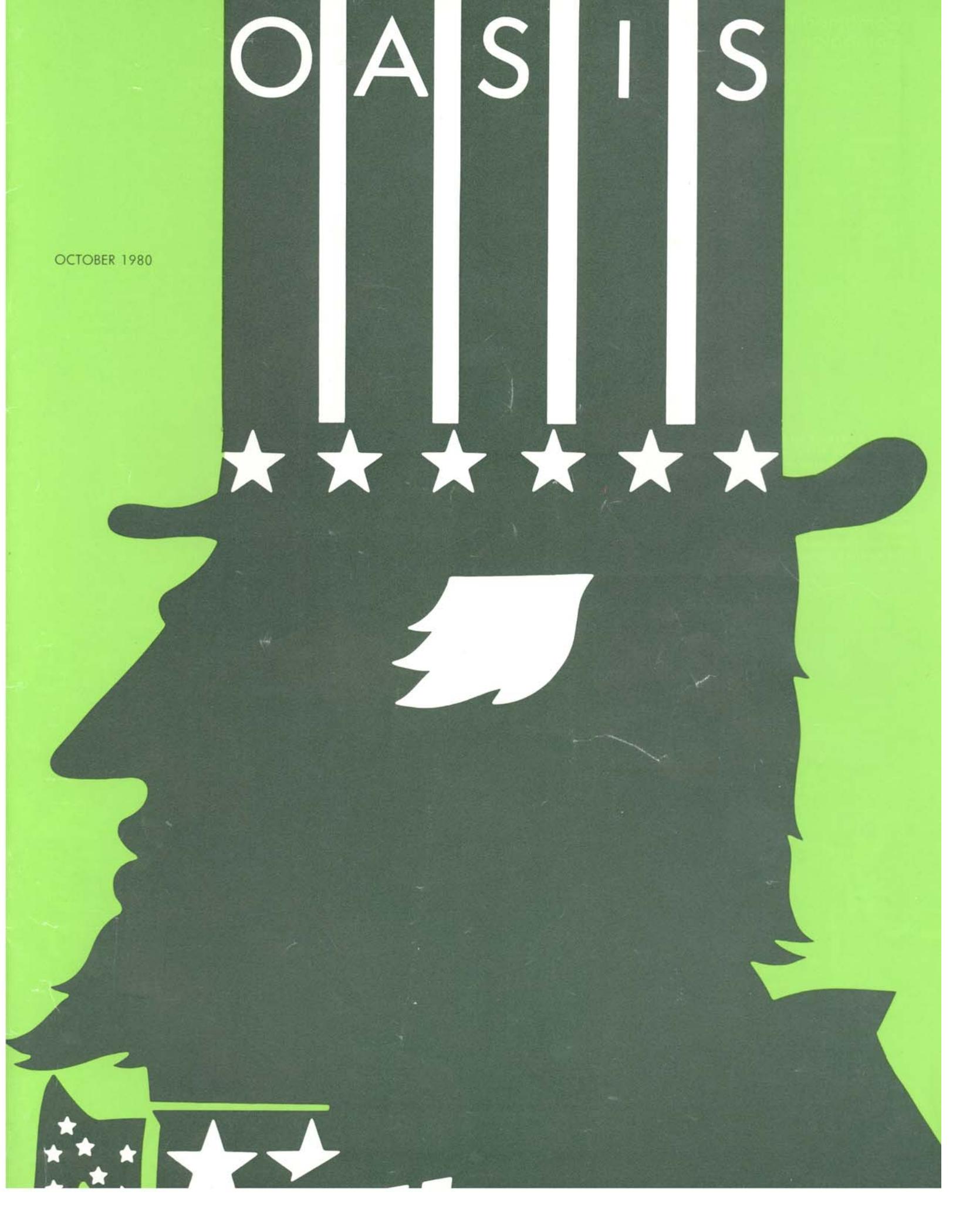


OASIS

OCTOBER 1980



REFUGEES MIAMI McCLOY CAMBODIA



On April 18, Joe Gonzalez, accompanied by two of his brothers-in-law and a sister-in-law, left the port of Miami in a rented, 60-foot lobster boat. Their destination—Mariel Harbor, Cuba. Their purpose—to bring as many family members as possible to the United States.

An operations supervisor at the Miami Central DO at the time, Joe had figured the trip would take a week. Others in the family who remained at home had chipped in \$15,000 to rent the boat and to purchase food and supplies for 7 days.

In spite of high seas and 8-foot swells, which Joe later learned were typical for that part of the Gulf of Mexico, they made the trip to Cuba in 35 hours.

"When we arrived, Cuban officials asked us how many our boat would carry," Joe said. "We indicated 175 and were told to wait."

The wait lasted some 3 weeks while negotiations took place to determine how many and which relatives would be allowed to leave. Meanwhile, supplies and gas were running out.

"Officials never came to our boat

during the day," Joe continued. "Instead, their visits usually were made between 2 and 3 a.m. We were told, without any explanation, that our boat would hold just 84 people, only 25 of whom could be relatives. The rest of our passengers, they said, would be assigned to us from among those who had sought asylum in the Peruvian embassy.

"Deciding who would come with us and who would remain in Cuba was painful. The future of our cousins was in our hands—freedom in the U.S. or a lifetime cutting cane in Cuba. We decided to keep the nuclear families together.

"Prices in Cuba were exorbitant. Gasoline jumped from \$1.50 to \$3 a gallon within 3 days of our arrival. Water was 10 cents a gallon, and a 5-minute phone call to Miami was \$85. There were at least 2,000 other boats in Mariel experiencing the same thing.

"The day we were allowed to leave, our passengers were roused out of bed at 3 in the morning. All they brought with them were the clothes they were wearing. No one had eaten for at least a day. On

board we gave them a little snack, but not much since we knew they would get seasick.

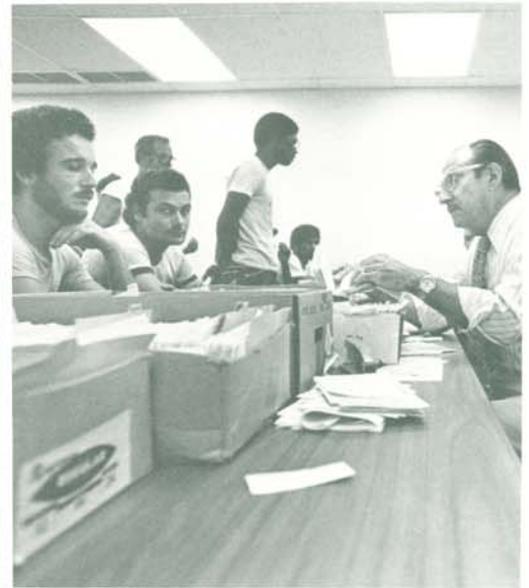
"Two hours later we arrived in Key West. Their shouts of joy were overwhelming, 'Viva Carter!'"

117,000 this year

Although Joe Gonzalez brought only a relatively few people to the U.S., countless trips like his have been taking place since April of this year.

A makeshift collection of small boats—sometimes dubbed the "freedom flotilla"—has brought more than 117,000 Cubans to the U.S. this year seeking a new life. Some who went to Cuba returned with relatives; others made the trip for money, as much as \$1,000 a head. Since June 19, the Coast Guard and Navy have been instructed to seize boats bringing undocumented aliens to the U.S.

Since Castro took over on January 1, 1959, more than 650,000 Cubans have fled to the U.S. To date, more than 177,000 have become naturalized U.S. citizens and more than 320,000 now have permanent resident status. Over 500,000 reside in Southern Florida.



Living without freedom

Why are so many Cubans coming to the U.S.? The answer is freedom.

Felix Ruiz, a recent Cuban refugee and brother of Isabel Iglesias, Appleton, Wisconsin, DO, explains what life is like in Castro's Cuba.

"Armed military police knock on your door in the middle of the night and question you about your visitors, your possessions, your friends. Sometimes, after the interrogation, they steal your belongings.

"You can be arrested for the most trivial violations without due process of any kind. There is no such thing as innocent until proven guilty. The judicial system has a prosecutor but no public defenders or defense attorneys. If you are arrested, you are assumed guilty. It is up to you to prove your innocence.

"You are expected to work for 10 hours a day, 7 days a week for 35 cents an hour. There is no time and a half for overtime. But 2 hours of overtime daily and 10 hours on Sunday are 'voluntarily' given to the state without compensation.

"Food and other consumer goods are scarce and rationed. A family is permitted a half pound of red meat every 2 weeks, and a half pound of rice each week. Coffee, a local crop, can be purchased for \$18 a pound, when available."

Besides the Cuban refugees, more than 15,000 Haitians have also reached the Florida shores. However, their motivation for leaving Haiti has been largely economic.

The U.S. offers greater job opportunities than their native country and a higher standard of living.

Cuban and Haitian refugees who entered the U.S. between April 21 and June 19 have been granted entrant status through January 15, 1981. As parolees, these refugees are eligible, if they otherwise qualify, for SSI, Medicaid, AFDC and emergency assistance. However, to receive payments under any of these programs, refugees are required to register with the Immigration and Naturalization Service and get social security numbers first.

Entering the U.S.

First stop for arriving refugees was Key West, and from there it was on to one of five Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) processing centers—Eglin Air Force Base, Fla.; Fort McCoy, Wisconsin; Fort Chaffee, Arkansas; Indiantown Gap, Pa.; or the Opa Locka Airport in Miami. Before Opa Locka was opened, processing in the Miami area was done at Tamiami County Park.

At the centers, the refugees were given blood tests and X-rays, checked for communicable diseases, photographed, fingerprinted, issued immigration cards (I-94 Arrival/Departure Records), and cleared through the FBI and CIA.

Family information was gathered, and relatives in the U.S. were contacted wherever possible. Before the refugees could leave their centers, sponsors had to be found. For many who were given only

hours to leave Cuba, finding friends and relatives in the U.S. took time.

Numerous SSAers, from field offices, volunteered to assist INS. SSAers were stationed at Eglin AFB, Fort Chaffee and Opa Locka to provide translation and assist INS with the various processing steps. In some cases, they explained the social security and SSI programs to incoming refugees. Their details typically lasted 4 to 5 weeks and consisted of 12-hour days, 6 days a week.

At Opa Locka, one of the two centers where Cubans filled out Applications for Social Security Numbers (SS-5s), as many as 1,700 refugees were processed daily—in 100-degree heat. A number of SSAers from the field offices and central office went to Opa Locka to assist.

Although the centers were officially closed on June 19, a number of refugees remained in them, having nowhere else to go.

Workloads soar

Shortly after the initial influx of Cubans into the U.S., workloads at Social Security offices in the Miami area—where most of the refugees are settling—began to rise. In mid-July OASIS visited Miami to find out how the offices there were affected.

In the Little Havana BO, Operations Supervisor Nora Bernal said, "On our busiest day so far we had 747 people in this office. There were over 400 lined up outside when we opened the doors. Most wanted to



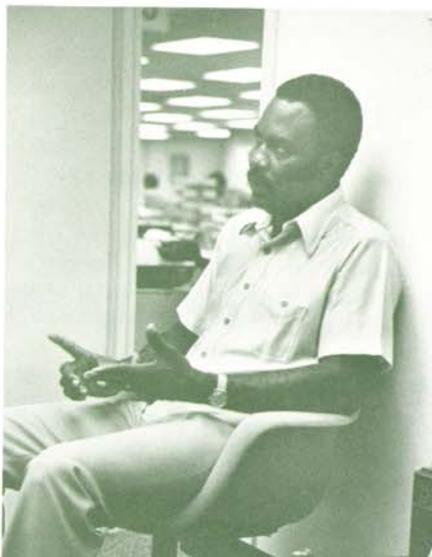
get social security numbers, and others came to apply for SSI. Although we don't take or process SSI applications for the refugees in this office, we do give them a protective statement to sign and explain that they will be scheduled for an interview later.

"A few weeks ago we ran out of Spanish SS-5s. I called all of the offices that I thought might be able to help, from San Diego to Puerto Rico. We managed to get a few thousand forms to keep us going and the promise of a fresh supply from central office.

"We usually average about 3,500 interviews a month. But in May we handled 4,900 and in June, 7,800."

More people are showing up at Miami Central, too.

"When they filled out their SS-5s at Opa Locka, many entrants had



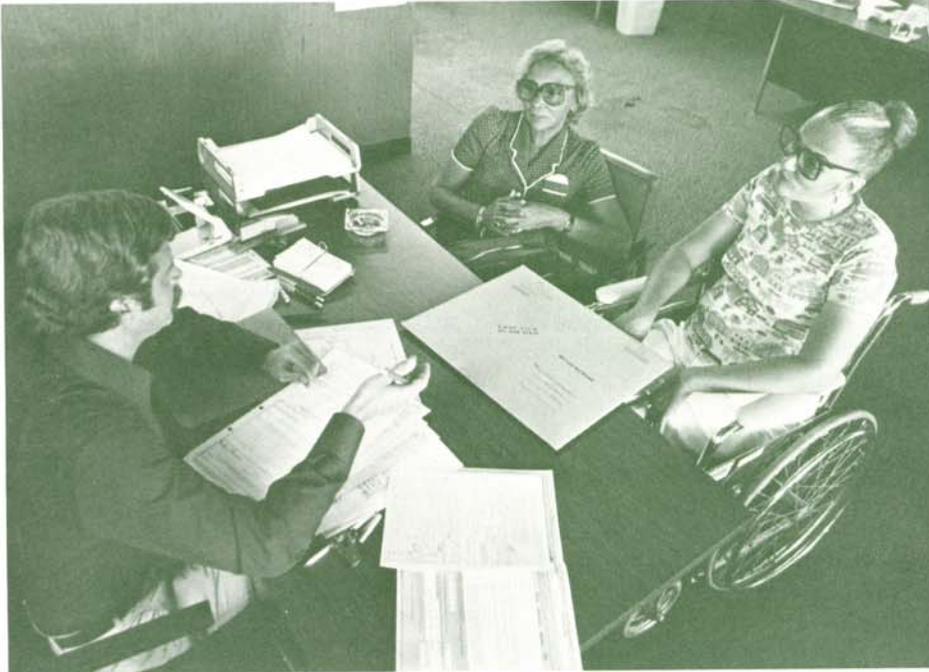
no home addresses and were instructed to give our DO as their mailing address," explains Assistant District Manager Al Gleiberman. "As of mid-July over 60,000 Cubans and nearly 7,000 Haitians had followed this procedure. When they get settled, they stop by the office to pick up their social security cards.

"And many refugees finding their way to Miami are coming in to apply for social security numbers. Last week, for example, we handled over 4,000 applications. We've worked out a special arrangement with the Postal Service. The applications are picked up at the DO at 2 p.m. and by 8 a.m. the next morning they're in the Wilkes-Barre Data Operations Center for processing."

Former South Florida Area Director Lucille Williams (now in OMBP) told *OASIS* that "although many refugees were initially sent to other States, about 98 percent are expected to wind up back here. The fact that a significant number would be applying for SSI convinced us that our existing offices wouldn't be able to handle the workloads. So on July 9, we opened a temporary facility to take and process SSI claims from refugees."

Taking SSI Claims

Located at 1001 S.W. First St., Miami, the Cuban Haitian Emergency Processing Operation (CHEPO) has 30 SSAers from field offices throughout the United States and as many as 5 doctors from the



Florida Disability Determination Services. Having DDS doctors on the spot to perform medical exams enabled most of the disability claimants to get approval for SSI payments in less than a day.

"It normally takes 6 months to open an office like this," explains Joe Gonzalez, now operations supervisor at CHEPO. "We did it in 5 days."

The SSAers at CHEPO are detailees from district and branch offices around the country chosen for their ability to speak Spanish and their proficiency with SSI claims.

Within the first 7 days of operation, CHEPO had taken 1,400 claims for SSI payments. "We originally guessed we'd have a 70 percent denial rate on disability cases," says CHEPO's first manager, Joe Scott, "but just the opposite is true. The majority of the claims are being allowed."

As *OASIS* went to press, CHEPO had taken 4,270 SSI claims. Other offices around the country were expected to take close to 1,000.

Protective statement forms were distributed to community centers and food stamp offices as well as Social Security offices throughout the Miami area. Anyone who considers himself or herself eligible for SSI benefits is asked to complete the statement and return it by mail. Appointments at CHEPO are then scheduled with the claimants.

A vacation it's not

How do those on detail at CHEPO compare it with normal DO operations?

"It boggles the mind to see the workload," says Claims Rep Grace Garcia, Pittsburg, Calif., DO. "It reminds me of the beginning of SSI.

"We start working at 7:30 a.m. and keep going till 6 or 6:30 in the evening. And there's all day Saturday, too. Sunday is a welcome opportunity for rest."

Grace, though, enjoys it all and when interviewed had just extended her detail for 30 days.

Claims Rep Douglas Roth from the Hanford, Calif., DO, agrees that the workload is staggering. A veteran of 3 years in the Peace Corps, Doug wanted an opportunity to put his Spanish to use and volunteered for a detail at CHEPO.

"I knew when the situation in Cuba broke that there would be opportunities here. But I didn't realize we'd be working 60 hours a week."

Commenting on the refugees he sees in the office, Doug says, "They are very gracious and tolerant. And the Cuban community here is absorbing the new arrivals very well."

Claims Rep Bob Kenney, Greeley, Colo., DO, is something of a rarity at CHEPO. He speaks not only Spanish but French as well. "I figured the French would help with the Haitians," he explains. "Their language is a combination of French and African. I can get by if they go slow. But so far, we haven't had any Haitians in the office."

Bob says he's handled 10 cases a day every day since he's been at CHEPO. "I interviewed one 80-year-old woman who had jumped the fence to get into the Peruvian embassy in Cuba. She stayed there for 11 days without food or fresh water while Communist planes strafed the grounds."

Bob and the others *OASIS* talked with agreed that although the work day was long, they are doing what they came to Florida to do—get involved. And their efforts are paying off in the lives of those needing help.

REFUGEES MIAMI McCOY CAMBODIA



Telling the refugees about social security

by Mario Chou-Lima

SSA has offices in many towns where an employee's bilingual ability in Spanish is seldom used. Lancaster, Wis., population 3,700, was one such town until last summer. That's when over 13,000 Cuban refugees were sent to Fort McCoy, located in the LaCrosse DO's service area.

Federal officials there asked the DO to inform the Cubans about our social security system. I was chosen to conduct the orientations not only because I speak Spanish, but also because I am a former Cuban refugee.

Imagine leaving right now for a foreign country where English is not spoken, taking nothing more than the clothes you have on. Imagine, too, that there is no hope of ever returning home.

I took that step on September 10, 1961—my 12th birthday. I had mixed feelings about the plane trip. Even though it was taking me to America and freedom, the trip meant leaving relatives—even my parents—behind. Those of us who came here during the "Freedom

Flights" of the sixties were documented before we left and granted political refugee status upon arrival.

I settled with an aunt and her family until my parents and relatives came. My mother came in 1963, my father in 1964. Most of my relatives also escaped except for an aunt and uncle.

Originally, both of them liked the Revolution and didn't want to leave. Later, they realized that what Castro had been doing was not worth a person's freedom. But by that time the "Freedom Flights" were over. They tried to come to the United States for years and finally made it during the last few days of the recent boat lifts. Now all my relatives are out of Cuba. Most of them settled in Milwaukee but didn't like the harsh winters. Except for me and my parents, all of our family members are now in Miami or Puerto Rico.

The operation at Fort McCoy gave me a chance to use my Spanish again. I found the refugees very eager to learn about American society.

On one occasion I was explaining quarters of coverage. I pointed out that presently a worker gets one QC for earning \$290. At the end of

the session one refugee said he understood the concept perfectly. He then proceeded to ask how many QCs it would take to buy a nice home. In Cuba a person cannot own a home. Desiring to learn about home ownership, this refugee had innocently equated QCs to purchasing power.

I was glad I was the one selected to explain the SSA programs to the refugees. During my weekly presentations, I met one refugee who knew my father. He even remembered me from those few times I had visited my father at his business near the market place. I also met another refugee from my old neighborhood.

Many of the refugees are skilled workers; I spoke with carpenters, electricians, accountants, and so forth. One lady had a Ph.D.

The refugees are concerned that the American public does not realize they are bringing skills and talents with them. Most of all they want to work and become productive Americans. Like many of us who came before, they'll find the road ahead challenging and oftentimes difficult. But they will have to persevere, because for them, there is no going back.



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